

A Zero Sum Game?

If Mark Twain were alive today, and in our line of work, he would perhaps quip about Windows 95 and Windows NT by saying “reports of their death have been greatly exaggerated.” At various times over the past few years, each has been touted as being both the operating system (OS) of the future and as a failure. Andrew Schulman wrote in *Unauthorized Windows 95* [IDG Books, 1994]: “Products such as NT...speak to too small a niche to be interesting” and followed with: “Windows 95 will be the standard desktop OS for the next five years.” Recent columns now say the opposite, painting a gloomy picture for Windows 95 as a “home” operating system. If you believe everything you read, you may be quite confused. Forget the hyperbole. Neither OS is perfect for everyone, but each has convincing reasons for its use.

A Remarkable Similarity. We’re tempted to choose an operating system like we choose a spouse: you can only pick one. Microsoft is altering this age-old trend on the desktop by minimizing the differences in the two platforms for both users and developers. First, the popular Windows 95 user interface is now available in Windows NT 4.0 (Shell Update Release), giving users the same “look and feel” across platforms. Second, since applications — the lifeblood of any operating system — are designed for a specific environment, ISVs have always had to select the platform on which to put their development efforts. Quite ingeniously, Microsoft gently coerced vendors to support both Win32 platforms by requiring Win95 Logo applications to work on both systems. Therefore, although Windows 95 and Windows NT have fundamentally different architectures, they can be remarkably similar for both users and developers.

Making a choice. Even if both can coexist in the marketplace and in your company, which one is right for you and for users of your software? Let’s look at four environments most Delphi developers have to be concerned with — development, corporate, mobile, and small office/home office (SOHO) — and see how Windows 95 and Windows NT rate in them.

Development. Probably the single most important environment for you personally is the one on which you develop software. For those of us developing 32-bit Windows applications, there is no contest; everything

significant to developers is in Windows NT: stability, crash protection, pre-emptive multitasking capabilities (even with Win16 apps), and Windows 95 UI compliance. Developers will typically face the least number of hurdles in terms of hardware constraints, since many of you who use Delphi 2 already have a Pentium with at least 24MB of RAM. **Grade:** Windows NT (A+), Windows 95 (B-).

Corporate. If perception is reality, Windows 95 is doomed for the corporate desktop. While at one time it seemed inevitable that Windows 95 would be the next standard for the corporate desktop, today’s conventional wisdom says that Windows NT 4.0 will own this market in 12 months. Slower-than-expected corporate sales, Windows 95 bashing in the trade press, and an incoherent message from Redmond have left many companies holding off on Windows 95. Robustness, security, and client/server stability are proving key factors in convincing many medium- to large-sized companies to opt for Windows NT. **Grade:** Windows NT (A), Windows 95 (B).

Mobile. Which OS should reign on the notebook? Neither is perfect, so your decision depends fundamentally on where you stand on the “Ease of use vs. Security” issue. Touting strong PC card support, hot docking, and advanced power management, Windows 95 is perhaps the best OS ever created for the mobile user. However, many companies deploying mobile work forces have a more important concern: security. Letting sensitive

and proprietary information leave the confines of a secure office environment is a notion that gives most corporate MIS managers nightmares. With Windows 95, you have no way to fully protect data on the notebook. However, NT’s secure NTFS file system prevents users from gaining access to data unless they have logged into NT itself. **Grade:** Windows NT (B-), Windows 95 (B-).

SOHO. For most users in the SOHO category, Windows 95 is the only one of the two that makes sense. Critical factors, such as performance and Plug and Play, help get the job done quicker with the least amount of effort. In this “Just Do It” environment, you will want Windows 95. **Grade:** Windows NT (B-), Windows 95 (A).

Making a decision ... for now. In 1996, choosing a desktop operating system need not be an either/or proposition. The right decision depends on the context. For now, it seems clear that Microsoft is comfortable providing a two-tiered solution. But whether Redmond’s dual OS approach is short- or long-term remains unclear. I suspect the answer depends largely on the market’s ability to accept the notion that two desktop platforms can — in fact — coexist and complement each other. ▲

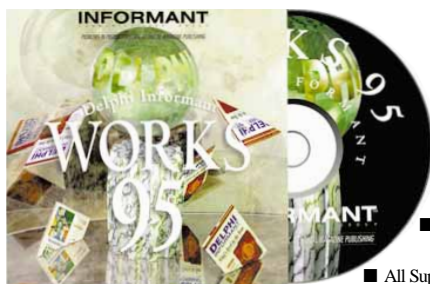
— Richard Wagner

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